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SUBJECT: TURKEY: VIEWS ON A TURKEY-ARMENIA HISTORICAL COMMISSION

REF: ANKARA 714

Classified By: Ambassador Ross Wilson, reasons 1.4 b, d

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Creating an historical commission to analyze the shared histories of Turkey and Armenia and the genocide issue has been Ankara's proposed first step toward normalizing relations between the two countries. In Turkey, political, legal and institutional obstacles undermine prospects for open and honest evaluation. Unbendingly nationalist interpretation of history at most Turkish universities and think tanks, tolerance for conspiracy and fringe historical analysis, and Turkish Penal Code (TPC) Article 301 that criminalizes "insulting Turkishness" all complicate Turkey's credible participation in such a commission. However, the government has made establishing this commission a priority, at least in part to further open up historical issues to genuine debate. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Turks are exhausted from their non-stop struggle against genocide recognition around the world. They know retaliating against every declaration or resolution that emerges in a foreign parliament is unsustainable. PM Erdogan made what was in Turkey an unprecedented and bold proposal in April 2005 to form a Turkish and Armenian historians' commission to examine the past. He and other Turks have touted their willingness to accept any result this commission comes up with. They believe this commission would foster a more open discussion of these painful topics among Turks and Armenians and deflect condemnations of their country by foreign parliaments.

WHAT SHOULD A COMMISSION LOOK LIKE?

¶3. (C) An historical commission should be composed of Turkish, Armenian, European, and U.S. scholars, according to Turkish State Archives Director General Yusuf Sarinay. The State Archives, he said, are a strictly scientific, technical institution and could only play a supporting role: Turkey would have to be represented on such a commission by scholars and researchers from Turkish public and private universities.

He stressed flexibility, and said the GOT has only one pre-condition for the commission: it should act and work scientifically, without any preconceptions. The State Archives are a unit of the Prime Ministry, and Sarinay said he knows first-hand that the GOT is determined to carry forward on such a basis.

¶4. (C) The Turkish State Archives' Ottoman collection, in Istanbul, holds 135 million documents; Sarinay said he would ensure all documents are made available to the Commission. The Archives have already catalogued and released hundreds of thousands of documents pertaining to Armenians. Such

openness, he believes, has not been seen from the Armenian side, public or private. Armenian scholars regularly use the Turkish State Archives. The State Archives have signed cooperation protocols with 32 countries. He believes the Archives operate at a European openness standard, and he reminded us that they have played a role in conflict resolution before, such as in the Balkans. He also noted that a majority of scholars utilizing the State Archives have been American, underscoring his view that U.S. scholars should participate in any historical commission. The participation of public and private archives in other key countries, such as the UK, France, and Russia, would also be essential.

¶ 15. (C) Center for Eurasian Strategic Studies Armenian Studies Program Director Ambassador (ret'd.) Omer Lutem believes sorting through the historical record would be a long process. Other countries' scholars and archives should participate. He recalled the last time the two sides attempted to address these issues academically, through the Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Commission (TARC) in the late 1990s. Once the study began, the nature of the problem briefly changed from political to scholarly, though a lack of political commitment ultimately derailed the effort. He believes a positive outcome could emerge from a commission, even if the two sides fail to agree on whether genocide occurred. Turkey has already conceded massacres took place. It might be possible, he said, for the two sides to come closer on the number of dead. Lutem believes it would be important for a third country, as chairman, to arbitrate the inevitable disputes that will emerge, especially early in the process. Such a chair should be a well-known, respected scholar.

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¶ 16. (C) International Strategic Research Organization Director Sedat Laciner, in his book, "Turks and Armenians, an International Relations Study (2005)," offered a contrary view, cautioning against bringing in the historians. The Turkish people, he argued, had chosen to put this period of history behind them, despite the large number of Ottoman Muslims killed by rebellious Armenians. This view, he believes, is validated by Turkey's normal relations with other former Ottoman ethnic groups. But the relentless Armenian focus on this episode of the past has led Turks to do the same, and bilateral relations have become "locked in history." In his view, current problems cannot be solved by examining the past; "the psychological, sociological, political and foreign relations components of today's problem cannot be covered up by archives or genocide accusations." An historical commission, by continuing this focus on the past, could impede a normalization of relations, he has suggested. The two sides should press ahead with practical measures to normalize their relations.

IMPARTIAL HISTORIANS WANTED

¶ 17. (C) The GOT says it is prepared to abide by the conclusions of a historical commission. A review of some of the existing literature already produced in Turkey underscores the difficulties Turkish scholars will have working with Armenian, or even third-country counterparts, to constructively and impartially analyze the available historical record. What passes for historical analysis here is less than methodical, carried out with the aim of refuting Armenian claims. Most Turkish historians view the events of 1915 as a "myth" constructed on false documents, Russo-Armenian World War I collaboration, Armenian irredentism, and the profitable "victim identity" of diaspora Armenians. A number of Turkish scholars further argue that Armenian genocide claims were propagated successfully by Armenian revolutionary terrorist acts in the 1970s and 80s, and that recognizing a genocide would reward terrorism. The president of the quasi-governmental, Ataturk-founded Turkish

Historical Society, Yusuf Halacoglu, basically denies that any massacres or deportations took place, alleging instead that Ottoman Armenians assumed Kurdish or Alevi identities. In recent World War I commemorations, Halacoglu claimed Armenian gangs killed over 527,000 Turks -- a figure far beyond most reasonable estimates, but not uncommon for Turkish academics and historians.

¶8. (C) Lutem believes the only way for the two sides to address the problem of fringe historians is to act responsibly in naming experts to a commission. There are few genuine scholars on this issue in Turkey; even fewer, he believes, in Armenia. It will not be tenable for one side to participate in selecting the other's participants. The seriousness with which the two sides approach an historical commission will in large part be measured by the quality of scholars the two governments nominate.

DIPLOMATIC AND LEGAL HURDLES

¶9. (C) Critics of Turkey's commission proposal have argued that the two sides cannot jointly examine their shared histories without first establishing diplomatic relations. Lutem disagrees, believing diplomatic relations could provide the political backing an academic historical commission will need.

¶10. (C) TPC Article 301, which criminalizes "insulting Turkishness," reduces the credibility of Turkey's historical commission offer. Opponents of the commission proposal argue the law hinders an open discussion. Some 328 Article 301 cases were opened against 1,533 individuals in 2006, according to the Justice Ministry; 131 persons were convicted. The GOT discussed, but delayed, amending the controversial law during its first term in office, and the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) administration remains divided over a proposed amendment recently sent to Parliament (reftel). The proposed amendment could reduce the number of Article 301 prosecutions and allow the GOT to shield Turkish academics participating in a commission, but 301 is likely to remain a sticky issue.

¶11. (C) The notorious law has had a tragic association with the Armenian issue, having been used to file charges (eventually dropped) against Nobel prize-winning author Orhan Pamuk and best-selling author ("The Bastard of Istanbul") Elif Safak, and to convict (with a suspended jail sentence)

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Armenian-Turkish newspaper editor Hrant Dink for characterizing the massacres as genocide in words that called on Armenians to reconcile with Turks. Dink was murdered by an ultra-nationalist youth in January 2007 after having gained additional notoriety from his prosecution. The article is further impacting the free discussion of Turkish-Armenian history in the latest trial of Turkish publisher Ragip Zarakolu. The prosecutor is seeking the maximum penalty of up to three years' imprisonment against Zarakolu for publishing the Turkish translation of "The Truth Will Set us Free," by UK-based Armenian writer George Jerjian. Ironically, the book --like Dink-- urges reconciliation between Turks and Armenians in its chronicle of the life of an Armenian grandmother who survived the early 20th century massacres thanks to the help of a Turkish Ottoman soldier. The account supposedly prompted as much controversy within Armenia and the Armenian diaspora as it did in Turkey. Zarakolu, prosecuted on numerous occasions and whose Belge publishing house was firebombed in 1995, stridently argues that Article 301 continues to open the door to writers and journalists being lynched or killed by ultra-nationalist gangs in Turkey. Turks, he said, have the right to know what Armenians think.

¶12. (C) Laciner does not believe Article 301 is a hindrance to impartial historical analysis between Turkey and Armenia.

Closed-mindedness is the real problem Turkey faces, he said. There are university professors in Turkey today who maintain genocide occurred, and they continue to receive their paychecks. While Article 301 has targeted some intellectuals, the intellectual atmosphere in Turkey on this issue is, he argued, much freer than in Armenia. The Armenian perspective is widely published and openly discussed here. Lutem agreed, maintaining that "scholarly" claims of genocide do not get prosecuted. But he conceded that amending Article 301 could help create improved conditions for an historical commission to be formed.

COMMENT: MAKING IT WORK

¶13. (C) The election of a new Armenian president, strengthened U.S.-Turkey cooperation against the PKK, the respite from a Congressional Armenian genocide resolution, and the anticipated amendment of Article 301 all help create a more positive environment for re-launching efforts to normalize Turkey-Armenia relations. But a commission has to work. Bringing the two sides together to analyze their shared history will not bridge all their differences, but it can create a process and build relationships and trust.

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